

# CONWAY

By John Swarbrick. F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A.

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CONWAY is a unique gem, unsurpassed in the entire kingdom. There is no other example of a mediaeval town in such perfect condition, with an exceptionally fine castle and fortified town walls, in such magnificent setting. It is a treasure that must on no account be spoilt. Serious mutilation would destroy a visual record, that could never be replaced. If it is preserved in its entirety, future generations may see what a fortified mediaeval town was like and understand as they can in no other way how our social life has developed and our customs changed. One of our duties is to remember that this precious relic of the past, that we admire so much, does not merely belong to the present generation alone. We are tenants for life, but also trustees, called upon to preserve our heritage for the benefit of those who are to follow us.

The impressive situation of the castle and town, by the widening estuary of the Conway, with the hills and mountains in the background, has aroused the admiration of every artist who has seen it, and has been the subject of almost innumerable landscapes. In this case, however, the first scenic impression is only one of a series of vistas, that appeal to the antiquary no less than to the artist. The most striking feature is obviously the Castle, commenced under King Edward I in 1284, but it must not be forgotten that the harp-shaped town once contained a Cistercian Abbey, which according to some authorities was founded in 1186. In the year 1198, Llewelyn the Great endowed the Abbey with a series of estates in Caernarvonshire, Denbighshire and Anglesey and granted many privileges and immunities. The most important part of the structure still remaining is the West wall of the present parish church, in which we see three lancet windows and, beneath, an arch resting on shafts with Early English foliage. In his book, *The Old Churches of Snowdonia*, Mr. H. Harold Hughes expressed the view that this doorway may have been the entrance to the chapter house. In the abbey, Llewelyn the Great died in 1240, and was interred in a stone coffin, now preserved in the Gwydir Chapel of Llanrwst Parish Church. The removal of the coffin from Conway was due to the decision of Edward I in 1283 to transfer the abbey to Maenan, near Llanrwst, before the castle was built, on the ground that a conven-

tual establishment would be inconvenient in the new town. Presumably the area of the walled town was too restricted for normal development and the inclusion of the original Cistercian abbey in addition. Quite possibly a town large enough to have accommodated both the abbey and the population of the town might have necessitated town walls so extensive that they could not be adequately defended by the garrison and levies available. When the late Dr. G. H. B. Kenrick, Q.C., lived near Llanrwst, on the site of Maenan Abbey, it was the writer's good fortune to be able to assist the doctor to locate a considerable length of one of the main walls of the abbey. Adjoining this wall was a spiral staircase, on which Dr. Kenrick found the gold half noble of Edward III, which was sold at the Caer Rhun Hall auction this year.

The most important domestic building in Conway is Plas Mawr, the Elizabethan residence of Robert Wynne, built in the latter part of the sixteenth century. This is a substantial stone-built mansion, with mullioned windows and wattle and daub panels in timber-framed partition walls. Some of the principal rooms contain much oak wainscot and elaborate modelled plaster decorations. The builder, Robert Wynne, was the third son of John Wynne ap Meredith of Gwydir Castle, Llanrwst.

One of the most interesting features of Conway is the general lay-out of the town and the modest character of most of the buildings. So long as the future development of the town is judiciously controlled, on similar lines, it seems unlikely that its character will be changed, but it might be most disastrously affected, if the comparatively narrow roads, characteristic of the old town, should be appreciably widened and if the frontages should be disfigured by the erection of extensive modern business premises. This would be all the more objectionable, if the mediaeval setting should be ignored and some mammoth business premises, designed in bad taste, with vulgar advertisements, should strike discordant notes. Anything of that kind would be a truly deplorable calamity. The best way to save the area within the town walls would be to schedule the town as a controlled precinct to ensure special protection.

A serious danger of this kind suddenly aroused deep concern in 1939. Under powers conferred by the Trunk Road Act of 1936, the Ministry of Transport had devised a means of preserving the town of Conway from mutilation by by-passing the traffic on the trunk road from Chester to Bangor. The scheme was to remove the Suspension Bridge, which was not considered strong enough and can only take one-way traffic, and to replace it with a single-arch bridge, which would extend from the present viaduct from Deganwy to the road at the foot of the castle walls on the Conway side. From that point, the road was to be diverted along the quay outside the town walls to the Bodlondeb estate, where it was to be

connected to the existing Bangor road. This admirable scheme, which had been most carefully considered, did not satisfy all the local interests. An alternative proposal was consequently prepared. The appellants claimed that a better course would be to carry the traffic through the town of Conway, up Rosehill Street to Lancaster Square and then along the road leading to the Bangor Gate, a modern structure, designed by Thomas Telford, the engineer, and constructed underneath one of the wall towers, which he had underpinned for the purpose. It was claimed that these roads would be sufficiently wide, provided that a few projecting corners were rounded off. When the width of the proposed new trunk road was compared with the widths of the existing roads in Conway, which it was proposed to use, it was perfectly obvious that the existing roads in question would soon have to be widened to the requisite width, if a Conway bottle-neck was to be avoided. Representations supporting the scheme of the Ministry were made by the leading Town Planning societies, the Society of Antiquaries, the Ancient Monuments Society and other bodies, but the Minister of Transport decided that there must be a Public Inquiry. This was held at Conway on July 27th and 28th, 1939, shortly before the Second World War began. Mr. J. J. Davies, an Inspector of the Ministry of Transport, presided. Mr. Hartley Shawcross (as he then was) appeared on behalf of Messrs. Chamberlain & Johnson, who were interested in the alternative scheme, and cross-examined, on behalf of his clients, almost all the witnesses called. In the transcript of the shorthand notes<sup>1</sup>, it is recorded that both Dr. G. H. B. Kenrick and the writer gave evidence on behalf of the Ancient Monuments Society. The writer was called first and, in the course of his evidence, said, "I have known Conway and North Wales generally almost all my life. In recent years I have been almost a constant visitor. It is rarely that a month has passed without it being necessary for me to visit North Wales, and it is seldom that I have paid such visits without calling at Conway.

"I have carefully examined the various drawings showing the Conway by-pass on the Chester-Bangor trunk road and am satisfied that no better scheme could be devised, provided that the work is carried out as regards questions of detail with due regard to the obvious practical problems and the preservation of amenities. To have carried a road of this kind through the walled town of Conway would have been disastrous in every way. Conway is a town of remarkable interest and it has so far been preserved in a manner without parallel in this country.

"There are on the Continent a number of examples of walled towns that have been preserved with great care, but I do not know of a single

<sup>1</sup> The writer is indebted to Mr. Arthur L. Ralphes, M.B.E., the Town Clerk of Conway, for permission to make these extracts.

example in this country that has survived with so little mutilation as the town of Conway.

“At one end we have the magnificent Edwardian castle, and extending from it we have the old harp-shaped town with its ancient church and old houses including Plas Mawr. Within the town the old roadways appear to have been preserved in their original positions, in most cases with their original widths. Some recent building has necessarily taken place but this has not so far been carried out in such a way as to destroy the effect of the old mediaeval town-plan. At the present time, it is possible for visitors to pass through Conway and to study its ancient buildings and mediaeval remains in the quiet atmosphere that is characteristic of the old town.

“To carry a great thoroughfare through the town would not only destroy the sense of scale, which is essential if the charm of the town is to be maintained, it would have the effect of severing the town, disintegrating and breaking it up in such a way as to make it possible for visitors to rush through it without understanding in any adequate way what it was originally like. Moreover, the noise and rush of traffic on an arterial road would fatally destroy the quiet that makes it possible to appreciate and enjoy the study of the ancient town in the manner in which it may be enjoyed to-day. The only way in which such an internal road could be made safe for pedestrians would be by means of crossings with Belisha beacons, which would necessarily impede the traffic and make the trunk road less serviceable for the purpose for which it was designed.

“The tendency would be to line the sides of such a large road with big stores and emporiums that would absolutely destroy the charm of old Conway, and make it no more interesting to the visitor than one of the main roads of an industrial town. To absolutely destroy the charm of a town in this way would not only be regrettable, it would, in my view, be nothing short of a deliberate crime. The charm that Conway possesses to-day could never be restored. To-day, we have in it a perfect specimen of a mediaeval walled town, a museum piece that has not been spoiled. To destroy it would be a deplorable piece of sacrilege and one of the worst examples that has ever occurred in this country.

“Visitors would certainly lose interest in a mutilated and modernised Conway of that description. At the present time visitors from America, the remote colonies and, in fact, all parts of the world make a point of visiting Conway, because of its interest and the remarkable way in which it has been preserved in conjunction with its magnificent castle.

“If the effect we see to-day should be destroyed the visitors would have no further use for it. Naturally, such a disaster would have a serious effect upon the fortunes of the town, and it is difficult for me to understand how any considered opposition to the scheme can exist. I have

conferred with architects, antiquaries, engineers and others regarding this scheme, and I have not yet met any one of them who is not completely satisfied with the scheme of the Ministry."

The next witness was the late Dr. G. H. B. Kenrick, who said, "To-day we are in an age of vandalism, an age of speed, but if you must have speed, surely it is better to take it round a town than through the centre of it. The advantages of the town—the attractions—lie, obviously, in the Edwardian castle and the very ancient walls. It is probably the most complete example of a walled town in the whole of the United Kingdom."

Subsequently evidence was given on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries by Sir Cyril Fox. Sir Cyril summarised the main points of his evidence as follows:—

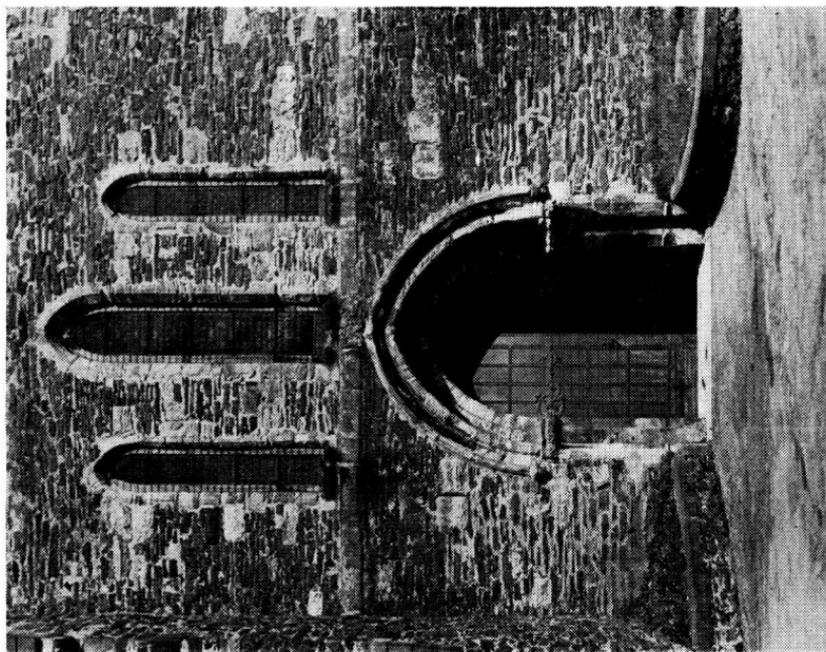
"(a) Conway is the most complete example of a mediaeval walled town surviving in Britain, built in the thirteenth century by a master of the art of fortification.

(b) The town preserves almost unaltered the original mediaeval town plan, with the main streets aligned on the market place (Lancaster Square), the castle or the gates.

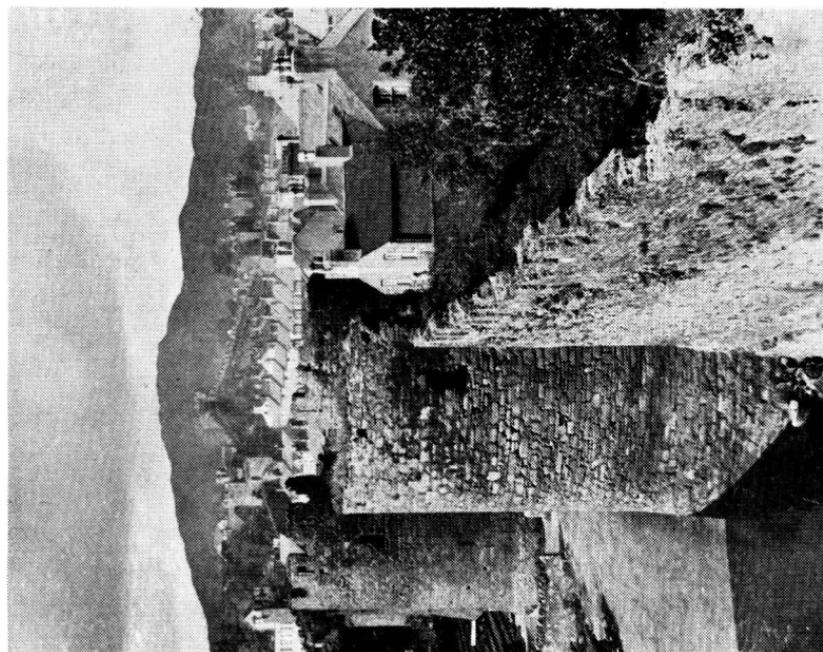
(c) The town and castle are one unit, historically, architecturally or aesthetically considered, so that an injury done to either impairs the significance of the whole.

(d) The preservation of these ancient features in Conway is recognised on all sides to be a matter not of local, but of national interest and importance. My society has therefore scrutinised with care the two proposals that have been put forward to deal with the present traffic conditions, which are admittedly intolerable and which must be amended, and is of the opinion that the by-pass scheme, which is the subject of the present Inquiry is the more satisfactory from the archaeological and historical standpoint."

Shortly after the conclusion of the Inquiry, the War began and most of those who attended the hearing were soon engaged on work of national importance, that occupied their attention so intensely that all lesser matters were liable to be forgotten. Then on May 17th, 1940, the Minister of Transport made an Order, whereby the route along the quay outside the town walls of Conway was declared to be a Trunk Road. The Minister did not express his decision in these words, but as the form of the Order would not be readily understood, without explanatory particulars, the best course will be for those specially interested to obtain a copy of the Order from H.M. Stationery Office, price 1d. The title is: "Statutory Rules and Orders, 1940, No. 816. The Chester-Bangor Trunk Road (Conway By-Pass) Order, 1940, dated May 17, 1940, made by the Minister of Transport."



Conway Parish Church. West Porch, showing original arch to Chapter House and triple lancet windows.



Conway town walls, section of the South wall bordering (right) the vicarage gardens.

The castle and town walls of Conway together constitute incomparably the most impressive of the fortifications erected in Wales by King Edward I. The town walls with their twenty-one flanking towers and three massive fortified gateways enable us to realise what mediaeval life was like in a small provincial town, in a way that nothing else in the entire kingdom can do. The Bangor Gate cannot be regarded as an ancient structure. The only ancient part is the upper portion of the wall tower at the top, which Thomas Telford underpinned, when the Bangor road was made in 1826. The plan of Conway in 1810, published in Pennant's *Tours in Wales*, shows the condition of the castle and town walls, before the construction of the railway and Telford's Chester to Bangor trunk road.

On Pennant's plan, two small unfortified openings were indicated in the town walls. These may have been added for convenience in later and more peaceful times, when raids by turbulent Welsh rebels were no longer anticipated. There was the Porth Bach or Little Gate, which led to the quay, near to the castle, and the postern, called the Porth yr Aden, which gave access to the quay through the wall that extended into the sea at the north by Bodlondeb. The small porth or opening in the Wall by the Castle, which led over the Afon Gyffin to the Trefriw and Benarth roads, was probably formed when access through the Porth y Felin was closed by the Railway Company. Originally the town walls were protected by a wide moat. On the Bodlondeb side, the external road is known as "Town Ditch," a reminiscence of a moat that no longer remains. Most of the moat would presumably have been dry, as the level of the ground varies considerably. Edward I evidently took a very special interest in the design of the castles at Conway and Caernarvon. Having studied the science of military architecture, as a crusader, he was doubtless keenly interested in the application of new ideas of defence. It is stated that for nearly three years he resided in North Wales supervising his schemes, and that it was at Conway he received the head of Llewelyn ap Gryffith, the grandson of Llewelyn the Great, who had been killed at Builth. All who are interested in this fascinating subject should read *The Heart of Northern Wales*, by Mr. W. Bezant Lowe, M.A., one of the best friends of the Ancient Monuments Society in its early days. An excellent popular guide for visitors will be found in *The Story of Conway*, by Mr. Norman Tucker.

All who wish to preserve the Castle and town walls of Conway, with its quiet old-world atmosphere and amenities, have been gravely concerned regarding the inability of the Corporation to raise by means of rates and tolls a sum sufficient to maintain normal municipal services and at the same time to do the necessary structural work for the protection of the castle and town walls, in a way that would ensure their

permanent preservation. Clearly, it was entirely wrong to expect a comparatively small town to maintain ancient monuments of such magnitude, which are part of our national heritage and should obviously be a charge upon the State and not upon the local ratepayers.

Fortunately a solution of the problem has now been found. On June 18th this year the Town Council of Conway agreed to lease the castle and town walls to the Ministry of Works for 99 years at a nominal annual rent of £1. During this period, the Ministry will have sole responsibility for maintenance, repair and administration, and all costs will be borne by the Exchequer, as in the case of monuments placed permanently in the Ministry's guardianship. In return, receipts from admission fees will, for the duration of the lease, be credited to public funds.

Ratepayers of Conway and members of their families will be admitted to the castle without charge on production of a permit signed by the Town Clerk. The Mayor of Conway, as Constable of the castle, will retain certain rights and privileges; for example, the flying of his flag from a tower of the castle on civic occasions, and on the birthday of the Mayor, and the flying of the Mayor's flag or the Welsh flag (*Y Ddraig Goch*) at half mast from the main tower of the castle on the death of past or present Mayors or members of the Council. In addition, the Welsh flag and the Union Jack will be flown from the castle at the same time on all appropriate occasions. It is a great satisfaction to learn that the Ministry propose to spend £160,000 on restoration work during the next twenty years. Presumably some part of this sum will be spent on the reparation of the town walls and the flanking towers and gateways.

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### BOOK REVIEW

*Churches of Somerset* by A. K. Wickham, M.A., F.S.A., 10 x 6. Pp. 176 (2 maps + 108 figs.) London. Phoenix House. 1952. 30/-.

In recent years, the English Parish Church has enjoyed the attention of not only serious students of Architecture, History and Archaeology, but also of amateur local historians. It is probably the destruction of the last war that has been responsible for this revival of interest in this country's glorious heritage of ecclesiastical architecture.

This book is a fine example of a work devoted to regional traditions and local characteristics. It is extremely well written and excellently produced with many fine plates, often from the author's own collection. Details are not forgotten and chapters are devoted to glass, brasses and monuments.

W.A.S.

BODLONDEB

# PROPOSED CONWAY BYPASS

